

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2022

**Remarks With Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis of Greece at a Reception
Commemorating 201 Years of Greek Independence**

May 16, 2022

The First Lady. Thank you, everyone. Please sit down. And thank you, Your Eminence, for your kind words. Thank you.

And welcome, finally, to the bicentennial celebration and the very in—first in-person Greek heritage event of our administration. And it's so wonderful to see so many friends with us today.

I'm told that there's a Greek proverb that says, "A society becomes great when its elders plant trees whose shade they know they will never enjoy." From democracy and philosophy, to astronomy and medicine, to art and literature, the legacy of Greece touches every corner of our culture. We all enjoy the shades of its branches.

And I've had the chance to visit Greece many times over the years. And I've stood in awe at the history of Athens and the beauty of the islands. And each time, I've been welcomed with open arms. So it's my pleasure to be able to return that welcome to you, our Greek and Greek American friends.

And I'm especially honored to welcome Prime Minister Mitsotakis and his wife. *[Laughter]* And we spent a couple minutes getting to know one another, and it was so nice to get to know you and Sofia and Dafni. You want to stand up and say hello? Your work is so inspiring, and I hope that we can continue to deepen our friendship.

The story of America is the story of all of you. You are a part of our beautiful and rich history. You help write our future every day. And the trees you plant will continue to cover our world. So thank you very much.

And now, as all of you know, this community has been a true partner to my husband throughout the years, and you mean so much to him.

So please welcome your President, my husband, Joe Biden.

President Biden. Thank you. Your Eminence, I've been hanging around with the Greek American community for so long, as a Roman Catholic, I bless myself the wrong way. *[Laughter]*

[At this point, President Biden made the sign of the cross on his chest.]

I find myself going right. I don't know. I—the Pope is not real crazy about my change. *[Laughter]*

Welcome to the White House. It's a welcome—it's wonderful to be able to host this reception again in person and to welcome the Prime Minister to Washington.

We've had good conversations. And I'm delighted to welcome your wife and daughters today and—as well, because when it comes to Greek American relations, it's all about family in my experience. As we—my grandfather Finnegan would say, "That's the Irish of it." *[Laughter]*

But I want to welcome Speaker Pelosi. Where are you, Nancy? There you go. And Paul Pelosi, her husband. And to the Members of Congress that are here today, including a great many proud Greek Americans that are here with us today.

And if you will excuse a point of personal privilege, I'd like to introduce John Sarbanes. I want you to know how much we all are thinking about and missing your dad today. Every day.

His dad was an enormous influence on me and educated me a lot when I got here as a 30-year-old kid in the United States——

The First Lady. And his mom.

President Biden. Oh, is mom there?

The First Lady. No—and missing his mom too.

President Biden. Oh, yes. Excuse me. And missing your mom as well. But your dad really took me school, and I appreciate it.

And, Your Eminence, it's great to get to honor and see you again. What an honor it is. And I want to thank you for your moral leadership and all of the work the Greek Archdiocese of America is doing to shine a light in the world.

And last year, we had to commemorate the bicentennial of independence virtually because of the pandemic. And by the way, I want to thank the proud Greek Americans who are on the forefront of the fight against COVID-19 and our efforts to vaccinate the world.

Last year, we celebrated two hundred—this year, we celebrate 201 years, the end of a year of bicentennial celebrations. And it's an opportunity to honor the history of our two nations and peoples and how we share so much together, a chance to look to the future that we're going to build together.

I'm incredibly proud the first year of my Presidency was able to be the first year of the next 100 years of relations between Greece and the United States of America. *[Laughter]* It's no exaggeration to say that today our friendship and partnership and our alliance is closer and stronger than it has ever been. We had a great conversation. And the dangerous part for you all is, we like one another a lot. *[Laughter]*

Our two nations are working together across the board on climate and energy, on trade and investment, on defense and disaster response, and so much more.

And our new Ambassador to Greece, George Tsunis, a proud Greek American, is with us again today. Where—George? I'm not sure if I was prouder to be elected President or George to be named Ambassador, which it was. *[Laughter]* But George—thank you, pal—has just taken up his post in Athens to continue carrying forward this important work.

And, Prime Minister, I think there is no area as vital for Greece and the United States to stand together than in the defense of our shared and diplomatic principles and our democratic systems.

The United States and the world owe a debt to the ancient Greek ideas that first taught us that "we the people" and the "demos," our democracy, can control our own destiny. And we—you made us believe it. And the idea that has endured for a millennia. But it's also an idea that every generation has had to fight to uphold.

Every generation has had to defeat democracy's mortal foes. Because in our imperfect world, the appetites and ambitions of a few forever seek to dominate the lives and liberties of the many. And sadly, we have both discussed, including at the Summit for Democracies last year, that democracy is more under assault today than—including in the United States—than any time in the recent past.

But the Greek people know, just as the American people do, that freedom and democracy are worth sacrificing for. Just as the ideals of the ancient Athenians inspired America's founders, the American Revolution, I'm presumptuous to say, helped inspire Greek patriots to fight for their own independence over 201 years ago.

And Greece remembers that when dictators and strongmen seek to dominate their neighbors, there is only one answer: *Oxi! Oxi!*—No! No! During World War II, when the Axis forces of fascism were sweeping across Europe, Greece said "no," inspiring the world through its resistance. Today, the war and wisdom—and the wanton disinformation have returned to Europe with Russia's brutal and unprovoked attack on its neighbor, Ukraine.

We're seeing horrific atrocities and war crimes, children being buried in mass graves, millions of refugees fleeing Putin's war, and Greece and the United States standing as one to support the people of Ukraine and impose severe economic costs on Russia to hold Putin accountable.

And I want to thank you, Mr. Prime Minister, for the moral courage—and I mean it, the moral courage—and clarity you have shown from the very beginning of this crisis: speaking out immediately to condemn Russia's aggression, welcoming Ukrainian refugees, being a bulwark of security for NATO's eastern and southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean.

Together, we're showing the power and the capacity of democracies to be able to act in unison. And we're helping Ukrainians say "no" to Russian aggression. And we're saying "no" to tyranny and to the idea that autocracies will outpace democracies in the 21st century, because that's what is at stake here in my view.

On a personal note, it's wonderful to see so many friends here today. Friends like Andy and Mike Manatos—where are you guys? There you go. Go back a long way—who have helped with these events over the years since I was a Senator and Vice President.

And Father Alex, who can't be here today—I wanted him to know that he's the reason I bless myself the wrong way. *[Laughter]*

And my friend from the University of Delaware, President Dennis Assanis. Where are you, Dennis? There you go. The president of the university and his sons, Nicholas and Dimitris. Welcome, gentlemen. It's great to have you both here.

I like to joke about being known as "Joe Bidenopolous" in my Greek American community in Delaware. *[Laughter]* I only own by 3,100 votes when I ran as a United States Senator. And I think we got 92 percent of the Greek vote in Delaware—*[laughter]*—and the nickname stuck. Small population.

But the truth is, I've been blessed with lifelong friendships and political mentors in the Greek American community. I've found inspiration in the courage and principled leadership of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, who fought for social justice and from the days—all the back to the days of Martin Luther King and right through George Floyd. And I thank you. I thank the church.

As a proud Irish American, I've felt a great kinship with the Greek American community. The same values define the way we grew up: courage, decency, honor, treating people with dignity as well as an immense pride in the heart and the heritage of our ancestors that they brought with them to America. This is an incredible resilience among Greek Americans, a determination—a determination—to keep going, to keep fighting, no matter the odds—no matter what.

And there's no greater symbol of the faithfulness and perseverance of the community than seeing Greek Americans proudly celebrate the reconstitution and reconsecration of the Saint Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine last November in Manhattan.

The original structure was destroyed more than 20 years ago during the 9/11 terrorist attacks in our—on our country. And in rebuilding that sacred home of the Greek Orthodox Church and

the Greek American community reaffirmed that even in the deepest, darkest days, we always have hope for the future. Always.

And today let us tap into that same spirit and rededicate ourselves to all the hard work that lies ahead: to defend democracy in Greece, in the United States, and all the places where it is under threat today; to stand up to the—for the dignity and rights of all people.

My dad used to have expression that everyone, no matter what—everyone—and this is not a joke; he would say it all the time—is entitled to be treated with dignity. Dignity.

And to renew our commitment to leave our children a world that is more peaceful and more secure and more just than we found it. So I want to thank you again, Mr. Prime Minister, for making the trip and for the excellent discussions we had today. And I look forward to see you again at the NATO summit very soon in Spain and continuing our close cooperation on behalf of our two nations and all of our shared values.

But really, Jill and I are looking forward to seeing in Greece as well. *[Laughter]*

Thank you. Thank you. The floor is yours.

Prime Minister Mitsotakis. Thank you. Thank you all so much.

Thank you, Mr. President, Dr. Biden. Ladies and gentlemen, it is really a great privilege to be here with you at this bicentennial celebration. My wife, my daughters, my team, myself are tremendously grateful for the warm reception you have offered us.

And honorable guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us here tonight. I know this is a very special moment for you, Mr. President. I'm sure you see lots of very good friends amongst this gathering. But this visit, as you pointed out, has very strong historical connotations.

Modern Greece, like America before it, was forged in the hands of dreamers, of revolutionaries fighting for freedom, fighting for justice. And it was the story of your independence struggle and its eventual success, coming as it did decades before ours, that inspired the oppressed Greeks to fight against all odds for their own freedom.

The leaders of the Greek revolution drew inspiration from what was achieved on this soil. Our ancestors did not just dream of freedom and self-determination, they fought for democracy, Mr. President, that elusive government of the people, by the people, for the people, which was invented in ancient Greece 25 centuries ago.

And in his annual message on the 3d December, 1822, President James Monroe remarked: "The mention of Greece fills the mind with the most exalted sentiments and arouses in our bosoms the best feelings of which nature is susceptible." "A strong hope," he said, "is entertained that these people will recover their independence and resume their equal station among the nations of the earth."

And it is this shared history of struggle, this shared history of sacrifice that binds our two nations together. It places upon us, as you said, a solemn responsibility to protect and defend the values that our forefathers risked so much to pass on to the next generations.

And today, this duty is more relevant than ever. The war in Ukraine, the invasion of Russia is a chilling reminder that what we took for granted in Europe—that maps cannot be redrawn by force—is unfortunately no longer the case.

As you know, Mr. President, we supported Ukraine from the very beginning with humanitarian aid, but also with military assistance. We did so for reasons of principle, which should be painfully obvious, but we did so also to protect a world order that is based on the premise of respect for international law, what you like to call a "rules-based" international order.

Neoimperial fantasies belong to other centuries. They must not succeed. And they must not succeed not only for the sake of Ukraine, but to send a very clear signal to other authoritarian leaders that any violation of sovereignty will be met by a unified and a forceful response.

And this is why it is so important that Europe and the United States stand shoulder to shoulder in this fight. After all, what we are protecting are the values which lie at the foundations of our liberal democracies. And as a Prime Minister of Greece, but also as a member of the European Council, I would like to thank you again, Mr. President, for your leadership.

The sanctions we have imposed on Russia are crushing and rightly so. But as we discussed, we must not lose sight of the fact that our societies are paying a heavy price in terms of energy prices. And in this respect, there is so much more we can do together, the European Union and the United States, to bring down the prices of energy and, in particular, the price of gas.

And as we reduce our dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, we also need to use our market power as larger purchasers of gas to deliver short-term relief to our households and our businesses.

Mr. President, I really mean it when I say that the relationship between Greece and the United States is today at an alltime high.

Last Thursday, our Parliament ratified the new defense and cooperation agreement between our two countries. And this new cooperation manifests itself not just in the naval base at Souda Bay, on Crete, which I hope you will have an opportunity to visit. It has been described by many as the jewel in the crown of our fantastic military relationship. But it also manifests itself in the port city of Alexandroupolis in northeastern Greece, just 500 miles from the Ukrainian border.

And apart from its military importance for NATO, Alexandroupolis, as we discussed, is rapidly becoming a regional energy hub, an entry point for liquefied natural gas into the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

And Greece plans to play an important role as a gateway for electricity produced from cheap, renewable sources, primarily sun, in the Middle East, in Africa. And we're very happy, Mr. President, that the U.S. has provided its unequivocal support for these projects.

A quick word about our region, Mr. President. You are extremely knowledgeable about the Cyprus issue. And please, use all your influence to put the negotiation process back on track in accordance with the U.N. Security Council resolutions. No one—no one—can or will accept a two-state solution in Cyprus.

The Balkans are also still quite fragile. We must keep their European perspective alive and tangible. Greece is a pillar for regional prosperity and security, and we will always seek peaceful ways to resolve our differences with our neighbors. I'm convinced that we can achieve that.

We place great emphasis on the 3+1 scheme, a framework that connects the U.S. with Greece, with Cyprus, and with Israel. And at the same time, Mr. President, we will continue to invest in our armed forces and make it very clear that we will not accept any violations of our sovereignty and our sovereign rights. And after all, we're doing so in order not just to strengthen Greece, but also in order to strengthen NATO's southeastern flank.

We will continue our longstanding cooperation between our defense industries. We will launch the process for the acquisition of a squadron of F-35 aircraft, and we do hope to be able to add this fantastic plane to the Greek Air Force before the end of this decade.

And I'm happy that, on Friday, Lockheed Martin officially expressed its interest in investing in Hellenic aerospace. Of course, the bonds that connect us—the bonds between America and Greece—reach far beyond our shared history, security and defense, and across the board from

trade to tourism and technology and cultural exchanges. There is so much, ladies and gentlemen, to be mutually gained.

As you know, Greece has come through severe adversity. The recent economic crisis was extremely painful for our people. But Greeks have proven their resilience. Democracy in Greece has proven its resilience. And today, Greece bears no comparison to the Greece that became the poster boy of European financial crisis a decade ago.

Our economy is strong. Earlier this year, we paid off Greece's outstanding debt to the IMF 2 years ahead of schedule. We are creating jobs and investing in new industries, such as digital and clean tech. Many European companies, wary of their dependence on China, are bringing back manufacturing jobs to the European continent, and Greece is an obvious candidate to welcome them.

And many American companies are investing in Greece for the first time, companies such as Microsoft, Pfizer. They're doing so because they see a country that has an advantageous geographic position, that is both a member of NATO and the European Union, a country with a stable government that is welcoming for investors. Because Greece, Mr. President, is back and a promising future lies ahead of us.

Let me conclude, Mr. President, by saying that you recognize many Greek American friends amongst this gathering tonight. You've mentioned several of them by name. They call you "Bidenopolous"—[laughter]—for a reason, although I suggested that maybe you should be called "Bidenakis." [Laughter] It would rhyme well.

I'm sure everyone in this audience is particularly proud today. I'm equally proud about what Greek Americans have achieved in the United States. Let me especially acknowledge the presence of your new Ambassador to Greece, George Tsunis. I met him at my office a few days ago. The first thing he told me was a story of his parents leaving a small village in western Greece called Platanos. We're honored to welcome George back to his second homeland. [Laughter]

And, Mr. President, marking this bicentennial, albeit with a year's delay due to COVID, matters deeply to the Greek people and to me personally. Recent events make this celebration that much more pertinent. The fight of democracies against autocracies is a defining battle of our generation. And the proud moments from the history of our two nations give us confidence in what we can achieve in the future.

We should never lose sight of what our ancestors fought for and that which we must now defend. All of us should draw great strength from their example.

I'm hugely grateful to you, Mr. President, and Dr. Biden for hosting this magnificent gathering. And I took your word very seriously that you do intend to visit Greece—[laughter]—to reciprocate this visit.

Thank you again, all, very much.

The First Lady. You know, my husband has always told me that all politics is personal. And I think that you can see that in the relationship that Joe has with the Prime Minister. And Mareva and I are already making plans to see how we can work together.

And talking about, you know, personal relationships, I want to thank each and every one of you for the relationships that we've formed with all of you and the support that you've given us.

So please enjoy the "people's house" with food and drink and music. So we look forward to saying hello. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 5:25 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Archbishop Elpidophoros, primate, and Father Alexander Karloutsos, former vicar general, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America; Pope Francis; Mareva Grabowski-Mitsotakis, wife of Prime Minister Mitsotakis; Rep. John P. Sarbanes; former Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Legislation Andy Manatos and his son Mike; and President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia. Prime Minister Mitsotakis referred to James and Eleni Tsunis, parents of U.S. Ambassador to Greece George Tsunis. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary as remarks by the President and the First Lady.

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Subjects: Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Congress : House of Representatives :: Speaker; Diseases : Coronavirus, domestic prevention efforts; Foreign policy, U.S. : Democratization; Foreign policy, U.S. : Peace efforts, expansion; Greece : Prime Minister; Greece : Relations with U.S.; Greece : U.S. Ambassador; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Russia : Human rights issues; Russia : President; Russia : Ukraine, airstrikes and invasion; Terrorism : September 11, 2001, attacks; Ukraine : Refugees, humanitarian situation; Ukraine : Russian airstrikes and invasion; Vatican City : Pope.

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